

SOTG and the ACE

Subject Area Aviation

EWS 2006

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 2006		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE SOTG and the ACE				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 9	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Since its inception, the Marine Expeditionary Unit Special Operations Capable (MEU (SOC)) has often been referred to as the tip of the spear for Marine Corps operations. These units provide combatant commanders a versatile force that can execute missions ranging from full scale combat to Non Combative Evacuation Operations. One of the vital Main Subordinate Elements (MSE) of the MEU is the Aviation Combat Element (ACE). Centered around a Helicopter Marine Medium (HMM) squadron, the ACE provides a MEU commander with significant combat power. Prior to deployment, the MEU goes through a rigorous 6-month work-up period under the supervision of the Special Operations Training Group (SOTG). Due to increased operational tempo and compressed timelines, MEU (SOC) workup periods have accelerated to an unprecedented pace. As the ACE prepares for deployment, many units are stretched thin in order to accomplish their predeployment training cycle. With reduced training periods, the importance of developing a positive relationship with SOTG is imperative. To ensure this relationship is developed, proper manning of qualified personnel within SOTG air department and the ACE will foster the professional rapport needed to guarantee the ACE is prepared for any mission.

Mission of SOTG

"The MEU (SOC) Predeployment Training Program (PTP) is a rigorous, aggressive and focused training program that builds upon individual and unit capabilities of the MEU Command Element (CE) and its Major Subordinate Elements (MSEs)."¹ To understand the basic mission of SOTG, one must understand that each SOTG is independently run by each individual Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF). All three have slightly different views in regards to training standards, but understand that all MEUs have the ability to rapidly deploy throughout the world; therefore, every MEU needs to be standardized. Third (III) MEFs SOTG mission statement is "to provide training in special operations and warfare in diverse environments for the MEF."² Associated with that statement are tasks which include to "conduct special operations training, exercises, and evaluation in support of the Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable)."³ Although SOTG is structured to train the MEF, their primary mission is to train and evaluate the MEU.

Myths concerning the ACE before the MEU workup period

¹ Marine Corps Order 3502.3A. Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) Predeployment Training Program (MEU (SOC) PTP), 4.

²III MEF SOTG Homepage. Retrieved 30 November 2005.
www.iiimef.usmc.mil/SOTG%20WEB/Home%20Page.htm

³ III MEF SOTG Homepage. Retrieved 30 November 2005.
www.iiimef.usmc.mil/SOTG%20WEB/Home%20Page.htm

Before 9/11, most HMMS worked off of a 24-month rotation schedule. That schedule consisted of a 6-month workup, 6-month deployment and a 12-month period in between to rest and refit with new Marines. As with any unit, HMMS have turnover periods which they release its more experienced members and acquire new Marines. In the aviation community, a pilot with two operational deployments usually has the opportunity to leave and rotate out of the squadron. It takes roughly four years to complete two deployments. Skilled senior pilots are the backbone of the unit and more importantly provide much of the instructor corps. If a squadron is proactive, they may have the ability to influence this decrease of instructors by training new pilots during the deployment. Per the Training and Readiness Manual (T&R), a "notional rotary wing training progression"⁴ takes a pilot almost 1 year in the squadron to become Combat Qualified. This model would work perfectly if the squadron was able to acquire all of its pilots immediately after returning from a deployment.

Pilots need practice to hone their skills. This comes through repetition in the aircraft. With such a rapid turnaround of units, it is not uncommon for a squadron to

⁴ Marine Corps Order P3500.14G. Aviation Training and Readiness (T&R) Manual Administrative (Short title: T&R Manual, Administrative).

acquire new pilots weeks before (or during) the predeployment period. This places a huge strain on the operations department to train aircrew and fill the flight schedule with qualified personnel. It is also important to realize that in a multi-crewed aircraft, those same stringent requirements are also enforced on the enlisted crew. Due to time restraints and priorities, squadrons often do not complete their required training prior to the work-up period. Therefore, it is important for the squadron to communicate with SOTG prior to the work-up period to ensure adequate flight is given for individual squadron training.

Recommendations for improvement

SOTG lacks proper staffing in the air department. The table of organization (T/O) states that the air department rates an air officer (Major), an assistant air officer (Captain) and one senior Staff Noncommissioned Officer (SNCO) in the shop. The table also states that those officers should be Forward Air Controllers (FAC). Rarely this is the case. Often, one officer fulfills all three billets. This type of under manning causes a complete saturation of time and effort for that officer. He is responsible for the coordination, conduct of the training and evaluation of numerous training evolutions. Many of

these missions are not conducted on base and require a significant amount of time to coordinate and set up. He must coordinate with the military units as well as the civilian authorities in the area which the units are working. He must also act as the overall safety officer for the evolution. Another mandatory requirement is that a FAC be present during all training evolutions in which troops embark or debark an aircraft. If the SOTG air officer is absent, a FAC from another unit must take his place. This forces SOTG to reach out to other units to help assist in the training. If a FAC is not able to be present, the mission must be cancelled. This can lead to problems in regards to training. Cancellations place an additional burden on squadrons to make up the training. The air department must be staffed at T/O. One officer cannot conduct all three billets. This lack of manning could lead to poor training or even a potential mishap if they have become too inundated with other tasks.

When conducting this proper manning, you must ensure that qualified individuals are being placed in these billets. When the monitor is filling vacancies in the department, the person filling the spot must have the correct qualifications. Third (III) MEFs SOTG states that they must "maintain a cadre of qualified instructors

capable of instructing and developing special skill instruction to the MEU.”⁵ This statement is true for all SOTGs. It is important to understand this because those instructors are recognized as the Subject Matter Experts in their particular field and are responsible for the proper training and evaluation of each MEU.

As stated before, the air officer and his assistant must be FAC qualified. It is also highly encouraged that the air officer be a Weapons and Tactics Instructor (WTI) with recent fleet experience. Quite often, this is not the case. Normally that person is Major, but on rare occasions it may be a Captain. This rank imbalance can cause some serious problems. This officer is the direct link to the squadron. He is the one who conducts the day to day interaction and helps establish training goals with the squadron. He is also responsible for the conduct of debriefs to the squadron Commanding Officer (CO) about the progress of his/her squadron. This professional relationship has to be based on respect and experience. This individual must be willing to potentially criticize a Commanding Officer and his squadron and provide recommendations to correct problems within that unit. How

⁵ III MEF SOTG Homepage. Retrieved 30 November 2005.
www.iiimef.usmc.mil/SOTG%20WEB/Home%20Page.htm

credible will a Captain be trying to explain to the CO that his squadron may have issues they need to work out? A possible solution to this problem would be to make former ACE COs the air officer.⁶ This former CO has just returned from a deployment and has a vast amount of knowledge that could be beneficial to the next deploying ACE. As paraphrased by a SWAT Lieutenant during a MEU debrief if you don't have instructors that have walked the walked, no one's going to listen to them when they try to talk the talk.⁷ If it is not feasible to place a former CO in the billet, a well-rounded MEU-experienced senior Major or LtCol would help. MEU-experienced is the key phrase in the equation. A senior aviator does the air department no good if they do not understand MEU operations.

Finally, the most critical way to improve the training during work up periods is develop a strong relationship between SOTG and the squadron. One way to improve this relationship is through the "trusted agent"⁸ program. A trusted agent is a senior member of the squadron, preferably a WTI and safety officer, who acts as a representative for the squadron during the work up period. This person establishes a working relationship with the air

⁶ Email interview conducted with LtCol Strohman conducted on 15 November 2005.

⁷ Email interview conducted with LtCol Strohman conducted on 15 November 2005.

⁸ Capt Brand phone interview conducted on 29 November 2005.

department and becomes an integral part in the preparation and conduct of training. They attend initial site surveys, establish training goals, and interact daily with SOTG to ensure they are getting the training they desire. It is imperative that the squadron places a person of trust and experience in this billet. They have the opportunity to request unique and worthwhile training. If this billet is left to a less than stellar member of the squadron, the squadron may lose valuable training that could have been accomplished.

Conclusion

As the Marine Corps continues to fight the war on terrorism, MEUs play an important role in our success. With the increase in deployment rates comes the trade off of lack of training prior to real world operations. SOTG has the ability to prepare the ACE for that future mission. To ensure this relationship is developed, proper manning of qualified personnel within SOTG air department and the ACE will foster the professional rapport needed to guarantee the ACE is prepared for any mission.

Word Count: 1,567